

NOTES ON CUBAN BIRDS

BY DAVID E. DAVIS

THE following notes were collected during May to September, 1937, and during April to November, 1938, while I was studying the social nesting habits of the Smooth-billed Ani (*Crotophaga ani*). Unless another locality is indicated the notes pertain to the region near Cienfuegos, where most observations were made at the Atkins Institution of Harvard University.

The nomenclature of James Bond (1940) is followed strictly, even when there is a difference of opinion. This is emphatically not a list of the birds seen; many common or rare birds are omitted. The object is to add information concerning the breeding habits of some birds and the status of certain migrant species.

The ecological conditions of Cuba today are vastly altered from the primaeval. In many parts half or more of the land is covered with cane, in which only one bird, the Grassquit (*Tiaris*), nests regularly. The rest of the land is pasture or plots of rocky land from which every sizable tree is cut for charcoal. Clearly the number of species and individuals is greatly limited by the lack of suitable environment. In the Trinidad Mountains coffee is grown on nearly every slope, but since the plant needs shade it is grown under a canopy of trees providing a very suitable environment for many species. Hunting is greatly limited due to the strict prohibition of firearms and the cost of ammunition. A wise set of hunting laws is in effect, but enforcement is extremely difficult.

Frank M. Chapman (1892) collected birds at Trinidad, 40 miles to the east and M. Rutten (1934) spent some time in Santa Clara Province. Thomas Barbour's "Birds of Cuba" (1923) is the standard reference on Cuban birds. Recently S. C. Brunner (1938-39) has published data on migratory birds, chiefly from Havana.

It is a surprise to find that the birds are nearly as active in mid-day as in the early hours of the morning. Two factors enter into this mid-day activity. The variation in temperature between dawn and 2 P.M. is only 14° C., and there are only 14 hours of daylight at the most. Thus in order to find food the birds must keep active and do not need to rest. Since the night is long enough for necessary sleep, no "siesta" is needed.

RESIDENT SPECIES

*Podilymbus podiceps antillarum*. Pied-billed Grebe. Breeds throughout the year in suitable ponds. One young, nearly adult in size, seen May 26, 1938.

*Casmerodius albus egretta*. American Egret. About 15 non-breeding egrets slept in the Arboretum throughout each summer. Commonly the birds feed in the fields around cattle.

*Florida caerulea*. Little Blue Heron. Starts to breed in the middle of April and completes nesting about the first of August.

*Plegadis f. falcinellus*. Glossy Ibis. One spent the week of May 10, 1938, in the Arboretum. Four were seen on May 6 and five on August 27, 1938 at Laguna Grande.

*Mycteria americana*. Wood Ibis. Five seen October 12, 1938, on Rio Caunao.

*Guara alba*. White Ibis. Three seen May 6, 1938, at Laguna Grande.

*Ajaia ajaja*. Roseate Spoonbill. Fifteen seen at Laguna Grande and near the coast May 6, 1938.

*Dendrocygna arborea*. West Indian Tree Duck. Breeds in June and July. Lays about 9 eggs.

*Aix sponsa*. Wood Duck. Three spent the week of May 8, 1938, in the Arboretum.

*Cathartes a. aura*. Turkey Vulture. Young nearly the size of adults found on April 10, and a nest with one young just hatched found on May 5, 1938. The vultures are frequently seen around a large specimen of *Stapelia nobilis*, a plant whose flowers reek of the smell of rotten meat.

*Polyborus cheriway audubonii*. Audubon's Caracara. Pair seen May 6, 1938.

*Falco sparverius dominicensis*. Sparrow Hawk. This species occurs in the light and red phases with some intermediate birds. Pairs composed of one member of each phase are common. Of the birds counted, 28 were in the light phase, 12 in the red, and 5 in the intermediate color.

*Fulica a. americana*. American Coot. A dozen seen at Laguna Grande May 6, 1938.

*Jacana spinosa violacea*. Central American Jacana. Two fully grown immature birds seen April 8, 1938. A nest with four eggs found September 25, 1938.

*Zenaida m. macroura*. Mourning Dove. This species begins to breed in March and continues till the first of October. About the middle of June the birds begin to roost in large flocks. The birds often use the same nest for several broods. and in one case used an old nest of *Mimus polyglottos orpheus*.

*Aratinga euops*. Cuban Paroquet. Flocks come down from the Trinidad Mountains occasionally in September and October.

*Coccyzus a. americanus*. Yellow-billed Cuckoo. A flock of ten was seen August 8, 1937. Many seen in May, June, and July, 1938, but none was seen in the spring of 1937. Two females collected on July 1, 1938; each had its ovary in breeding condition.

*Chordeiles minor gundlachi*. West Indian Nighthawk. This subspecies arrives about the middle of April and leaves in August.

*Nephoecetes n. niger*. Black Swift. A swift, considered to be this species, was abundant at San Blas, Trinidad Mountains, May 24, 1938. No specimen was collected.

*Streptoprocne zonaris pallidifrons*. Cloud Swift. Common in June and July flying over the fields. Several flocks of more than one thousand birds were seen.

*Colaptes c. chrysocaulosus*. Cuban Flicker. Common in the Trinidad Mountains.

*Tyrannus d. dominicensis*. Gray Kingbird. Incubation period is 14 days, and the young remain in the nest for 17 days. Two birds were seen October 10, 1938, but most individuals leave before that date for the south.

*Corvus leucognathus nasicus*. White-necked Crow. Four seen on September 9, 1937, in the foothills of the Trinidad Mountains.

*Mimus polyglottos orpheus*. Cuban Mockingbird. Of a total of 18 nests, 12 contained three eggs, and 6 contained four eggs. The incubation time is ten days, and the birds leave the nest after 8 to 13 days. Many nests are destroyed by snakes. The following species are mimicked in song: *Tolmarchus c. caudifasciatus*, *Crotophaga ani*, *Colinus virginianus*, *Tyrannus d. dominicensis*, and *Falco sparverius dominicensis*.

*Holoquiscalus niger gundlachii*. Greater Antillean Grackle. Nests in colonies in trees, beginning about the first of April. Nesting is over by the middle of June and the birds spend the rest of the year in large flocks.

*Agelaius h. humeralis*. Tawny-shouldered Blackbird. This species spends most of the year in flocks but separates into pairs for nesting.

*Tiaris o. olivacea*. Yellow-faced Grassquit. The flocks break up in the middle of May, when the pairs start to breed. The male frequently builds abortive nests.

### MIGRANTS

Cuba is the winter home of many North American species. The following notes on migration were collected from May 8 to September 12, 1937, and from April 8 to October 15, 1938. The first date given is the latest date on which the species was seen in spring, and the second date is the earliest date on which the species was seen in the fall migration. The dates are given only for those species which were seen with sufficient frequency to indicate the migration period.

The warblers are the most abundant migrants and arrive in waves several days apart. A wave of warblers arrived with a cool spell from October 2 to 5, 1938. The relative number of individuals arriving was: October 2 twenty-four; October 3 nineteen; October 4 thirty-nine; October 5 nineteen; October 6 three; October 7 thirteen; October 8 twelve.

*Chidonias nigra surinamensis*. Black Tern. Five seen August 8, 1938.

*Chordeiles minor subsp.* Nighthawk. One was seen on September 9, 1937. Since the Cuban birds had been gone a month, this bird was probably a North American migrant.

*Megaceryle a. alcyon*. Belted Kingfisher. Tolerably common. April 29, 1938; September 2, 1937.

*Dumetella carolinensis*. Catbird. April 21, 1938.

*Poliophtila caerulea*. Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. August 13, 1938. Not seen in April or May in either year.

*Comptothlypis americana pusilla*. Parula Warbler. April 28, 1938; September 5, 1938.

*Dendroica c. caerulescens*. Black-throated Blue Warbler. April 28, 1938; September 2, 1938. This species is extremely tame and enters houses frequently.

*Dendroica dominica*. Yellow-throated Warbler. April 15, 1938; August 12, 1938.

*Dendroica discolor*. Prairie Warbler. April 19, 1938; August 16, 1938.

*Dendroica palmarum*. Palm Warbler. May 6, 1938; September 14, 1938.

*Seiurus aurocapillus*. Ovenbird. April 23, 1938; September 10, 1938. A single individual was seen on May 20, 1937. The true migration is indicated by the dates.

*Seiurus noveboracensis*. Northern Water-thrush. May 7, 1938; July 27, 1937. A single individual was seen July 8, 1938, but it was probably a non-breeding bird. Two were heard singing on August 20, 1938.

*Seiurus motacilla*. Louisiana Water-thrush. October 4, 1938.

*Geothlypis trichas*. Common Yellow-throat. May 12, 1938; September 5, 1938.

*Setophaga ruticilla*. American Redstart. May 13, 1937; August 6, 1937. The adults arrive in the fall about two weeks after the immatures. Individuals started to sing April 20, 1938.

*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*. Bobolink. May 10, 1938.

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CHECK-LIST OF BIRDS OF THE WEST INDIES. By James Bond. The Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia. 1940 (published July 25): 6 x 9 in., xi + 184 pp., map. \$2.00.

This very useful check-list incorporates a large amount of data within a few pages. Under each form the author gives a reference to the original description and to synonyms, if any, published since the first three volumes of Peters' "Check-list" and parts 2-13 of Hellmayr's "Catalogue." The range is stated in some detail. A very worthwhile feature, especially in a region in which there is a high degree of endemism and in which many forms are gradually being exterminated, is a statement of the occurrence and abundance of nearly every bird, based mainly upon the author's own experience in the field. Appendices list birds known only from subfossil remains, species known only from hearsay, and introduced forms. Of considerable interest are the numerous comments on the probable relationships of various birds, as suggested by similarity of voice and breeding behavior. The author takes a moderate stand in the matter of recognition of genera and species, and he even does not hesitate to synonymize some of his own races.

Bond recognizes 692 forms of birds as occurring in the West Indies. In 1892 Cory listed 585 forms from the same area, so that approximately 100 birds have been added within the last 50 years. This increase is partly due to the description of new subspecies and partly to the collecting of North American migrants. Very few actual "discoveries" have been made, however, since only five or six full species have been added during that period. In the author's words, "it may be said that systematic study of West Indian birds is almost completed."

This book is indispensable to anyone interested in the distribution of West Indian birds.—P. Brodtkorb.